

George Manville Fenn

"Featherland"

Chapter One.

How Spring was Coming.

"Hallo, old Yellowbill! what's brought you out so early?" said a fine fat thrush, one bright spring morning, stopping for a moment to look at his companion, and leaving the great broken-shelled snail he had rooted out of the ivy bush curling about upon the gravel path. "Hallo, old Yellowbill! what's brought you out so early?"

"What's that to you, old snail-crusher?" said the blackbird, for he was in rather an ill temper that morning, through having had a fright in the night, and being woke up by old Shoutnight the owl, who had been out mousing and lost his wife, and sat at last in the ivy-tod halloaing and hoo-hooing, till the gardener's wife threw her husband's old boot out of the window at him, when he went flop into the laurel bush, and banged and bounced about, hissing and snapping with his great bill, while his goggle eyes glowed so angrily that the blackbird's good lady popped off her nest in a hurry and broke one of her eggs, and, what was worse, was afraid to go back again till the eggs were nearly cold; and then she was so cross about it, that although the broken egg was only a bad one, she turned round upon Flutethroat, her husband, who had been almost frightened to death, and told him in a pet it was all his fault for not picking out a better place for the nest.

So it was no wonder that Flutethroat, the blackbird, turned grumpy when neighbour Spottleover, the thrush, called him "Yellowbill;" for of course he did not like it any better than a man with a red nose would like to be called Hot-poker. But it was such a fine morning, and there were so many dew-worms lying out in the cool grass that the neighbours could not stop to be crabby. So Spottleover flew off with his snail, and Flutethroat soon had hold of a thumping, great worm, and set to work, tug-tug, to draw it from its hole, and then pulled and poked it about till it was easily to be packed in a knot, when he took it in his bill and flew off to the laurel bush, where Mrs Flutethroat was

busy sitting upon four green speckly eggs, and waiting very impatiently for her breakfast.

Just then the sun cocked one side of his great round face over the hill, and looked down upon Greenlawn garden, where all this took place, and tried to make the dew-drops glitter and shine upon the grass and leaves; but he could not, for Dampall, the mist, was out, and had spread himself all over the place like a great wet smoke; and for ever so long he would not move, for he did not like the sun at all, because he, as a mist, was good friends with the moon, and used to let her beams dance all over him. But it was a fine spring morning, and the sun had got up in a good humour, and had no end of business to get through that day. There was all the water on the lowlands to drink up; all the little green buds just coming out on the trees to warm; the bees to waken up and send honey-seeking amongst the crocuses, primroses, and violets, that were all peeping out from amongst last autumn's dead leaves; flies to hunt out of crevices where they had been asleep all the winter; and old Bluejacket, the watchman beetle, to wake up from his long doze; as well as Nibblenut the squirrel, Spikey the hedgehog, and ever so many more old friends and neighbours; and so, of course, he was not going to be put down by a cold, raw mist. And, "Pooh!" he said, looking sideways at it, and, as he got his face a little higher, right through it, "Pooh! that won't do; you've been up all night, so be off to bed, and don't think that I am going to put up with any of your nonsense. You had it all your own way whilst I was busy down south; but I've come back now to set things right; so off you go."

Whereupon the mist looked as raw and cross as he could, but it was of no use; so he rolled himself off the lawn, down the hollow, and into the vale, where he hung about over the river ever so long, evidently meaning to come back again; but the sun was after him in a twinkling, and so there was nothing else for it, and the poor mist crept into a cave by the river's bank, and went to sleep all day.

"Hooray!" said the birds when the mist was gone; and all the little pearly dew-drops were sparkling and twinkling on the grass. The daisy opened his eye and sat watching the grass grow; while the bees—as their grand friends, the great flowers, had not yet come to town—came buzzing about, and carried the news from daisy to daisy that Queen Spring was coming, and that there were to be grander doings than ever in the garden. "Hooray!" said the birds, for they knew it too, and they all set to work, singing in the gladness of their hearts to think that old

Niptoes the winter had gone at last, and that there would be plenty to eat, and no more going about with feathers sticking up, and no leaves to shelter anybody by night.

A fine place was Greenlawn, for there the birds had it all their own way; not a nest was touched; not a gun was ever seen; and as to powder, the rooks up in the lime-trees never smelt it in their lives; but built their great awkward nests, and punched the lawn about till the grubs used to hold consultations together, and at last determined to emigrate, but as no one would come out of the ground to make a start, any more than a mouse could be found bold enough to put the bell on the cat's neck as told in the old fable, the grubs stopped there year after year, and had a very, very hard time of it. It was a regular feast-land for the birds; there were no such buds anywhere else to peck at, for so the tomtits and bullfinches thought; no such strawberries for the blackbirds and thrushes; and as to the elder-berries down by the pond, the starlings used to come in flocks to strip them off, and then carelessly leave ever so many wasting upon the ground.

"Hooray!" said the birds that morning; and they sang and sang so loudly and sweetly that the master of the garden opened his window and sat down to listen to them. But they had something else to do besides sing; there was courting, and wedding, and building, and housekeeping, going on all over the garden. Mr and Mrs Redbreast were just married, and shocking as it may seem, were quarrelling about the place where they should live. Mr Robin wanted the snug quarters in the ivy, down by the melon pits; while Mrs Redbreast said it was draughty, and made up her mind to live in the rockery amongst the fern. Mr and Mrs Specklems, the starlings, were very undecided about the hole in the chimney-stack, so much so, that when they had half-furnished it, they altered their minds and went to the great crack half way up the old cedar, and settled there; "like a pair of giddy unsettled things," as the jackdaw said, who meant to have been their neighbour; but was not above taking possession of the soft bed they had left behind. As to Spottleover, he, too, was out of temper all the rest of the day, and when Flutethroat met him in the afternoon he found his neighbour all smeared with clay, and looking for all the world like a clay-dabbing plasterer as he was.

"There, just look at those wretched little cocktail things," said Flutethroat, pointing to the wrens, hard at work at their nest, just when the cock bird flew up on to the wall, perked about for

a moment, sang his song in a tremendous hurry, and seemed to leave off in the middle, as he popped down again to his work.

"Good job, too," said the thrush; "I wish mine was a cocktail, and then I shouldn't have had these nobs of clay sticking to it;" saying which he showed his neighbour three or four little clay-pellets attached to his tail-feathers, evidently caught up when fetching his mortar from the pond side.

"Ah! it's a stupid plan that plastering," said a conceited-looking chaffinch, joining in the conversation. "I wonder your children don't die of rheumatic gout."

"Take that for your impudence, you self-satisfied little moss-weaver;" saying which the thrush gave the new-comer such a dig in the back with his hard bill, that the finch flew off in a hurry, vowing that he would pass no more opinions upon other people's building.

Chapter Two.

The Stolen Eggs.

Plenty of fine mornings came and went, and busier than ever were all the birds. Nests had been built; eggs had been laid; little callow birds had been hatched; and the little mouths wanted so much feeding that there was not even time to sing. But there was a good deal of discomfort and unpleasantness abroad, for a young relative of Spottleover the thrush had lost three or four eggs from his nest at the bottom of the garden. Of course they had been stolen, but who was the culprit? A chattering old sparrow said it was one of the rooks; and when the report got up in the rookery there was a fine commotion about it that evening, for the rooks held quite a parliament to vindicate the innocence of their order; and at last passed a vote of censure upon the sparrow for his false accusation; agreed to send him to Coventry; and, as one old rook said, it would have been much more to his credit to have had his shirt-front washed, for it was dreadfully dirty, than to have gone making the rooks out blacker than they really were. Then someone said it was the magpie; but he was dreadfully indignant about it, and his long tail trembled with passion; but he quite cleared his character before he flew back to his nest in the great elm down the field, for as he very truly said, if the case had been respecting a young bird or two, and times had been very hard,

he might have fallen into temptation, and taken a callow nestling; "but as to eggs," he said, laying a black paw upon his white waistcoat, "upon his honour, no, not even if they were new laid."

And so the eggs kept going, and nobody knew where; for they all felt when the magpie said "Tar-tar," and flew away, that he had spoken openly and honourably, and was not the thief. At last one evening, when all the birds were as busy as their old friends the bees, all of a sudden there was a complete full stop throughout the garden, for from one of the low branches of the great cedar someone suddenly shouted out in a full, loud, and distinct voice—"Cuckoo!" and again two or three times over—"Cuckoo!"

"Halloa!" said Flutethroat, ceasing his worm hunt, "who is that?"

"Cuckoo," said Spottleover, dropping a snail; "what does that mean?"

And all through the garden there ran a thrill of excitement, for the thrush's cousin flew up to the birds who had collected together, and told them he had seen the thief in the act of taking an egg, and he had flown into the cedar-tree. He was a long ugly bird in a striped waistcoat, and—

But the narrative was interrupted by the long mellow call of—

"Cuckoo!"

"What's it mean?" chorused the birds.

"Oh, that's his impudence," said the old owl, winking and blinking, for he had been roused out of his sleep by the new call.

"Come now, that won't do; we don't want you meddling now, old mousetrap," said the birds; "none of your night-birds here." Saying which, they pecked and buffeted old Shoutnight to such a degree that he was glad to shuffle off to his hole behind the ivied chimney-stack.

All this while the cry kept coming out of the cedar, "Cuckoo! cuckoo!"

"It's Dutch," said a greenfinch, looking very knowing.

"No, it isn't; he comes from Spain, I know," said the goldfinch.

"Chiswick, Chiswick," shouted the sparrow.

"Tchah," said the jackdaw.

"Twit, twit," said the nuthatch.

"Little bit o' bread and no cheese," said the yellowhammer.

"Ah, we'll 'twit' him with his theft," said the sage old starling; "and it's neither bread nor cheese he'll get here. He's a thief; a cheat; a—"

"Quack, quack," cried a duck from the pond.

"Ah! and a quack," continued the starling, and then he grew so excited that the rest of his speech was lost in sputtering, chattering, and fizzing; and all the birds burst out laughing at him, for all his little sharp shining feathers were standing up all over his head, and he looked so comical that they could not contain themselves, but kept on tittering, till all of a sudden—

"Cuckoo!" said the stranger, and came right into view.

"He's a foreigner," shouted the birds; "give it him;" and away they went, mobbing the strange bird; flying at him, over him, under him, round and round him, darting in and out in all directions, and pecking him so sharply that he was obliged to make signs for mercy; when he was immediately taken into custody by the starlings, and made to go into a hole in the cedar, where a jackdaw kept watch while they made preparations for trying the thief.

Chapter Three.

Preparations for the Trial.

And a fine job those preparations were. It was all in vain that a meeting was held, and the perch taken; everybody wanted to talk at once, and, what was worse still, everybody did talk at once, and made such a clatter, that Tom, the gardener's boy, threw his birch-broom up in the cedar-tree, and then had his ears boxed because it did not come down again, but lay across two boughs ever so high up and out of reach, to the great annoyance of Mrs Turtledove, a nervous lady of very mournful habit.

The birch-broom scattered the birds for a while, but they soon came back, for they were not going to be frightened away by a bundle of twigs, when they did not even care for a scarecrow, but used to go and sit upon its head; while the tomtit declared it was a capital spider trap, and used to pick out no end of savoury little spinners for his dinner.

When the birds had all settled again, they went to business in a quieter way, for they did not wish to be again driven off in such a sweeping manner; so at last they decided that the owl should be judge, because he looked big and imposing.

"Oh!" said Speckle the starling, "but he's so sleepy and chuckleheaded."

"All the better, my dear sir," said the magpie, who had come back on hearing the news of the capture; "all the better, my dear sir, for you know you will be for the prosecution, and then, with a highly respectable jury, we shall get on capitally; in fact, hardly want any judge at all, only to keep up appearances."

"Whew, whoo, whistlerustle," away they went, and settled in a cloud on the top of the old ivied house, and round about the owl's nest—birds of all colours, sorts, and sizes; long tails and short tails; long bills and short bills; worm-workers, grub-grinders, bud-biters, snail-crushers, seed-snappers, berry-bringers, fruit-finders, all kinds of birds—to fetch Judge Owl to sit at the court, to try the foreign thief, who had made such a commotion, trouble, bother, worry, and disturbance; and kicked up such a dust, such a shindy, such a hobble, as had never before been known in Featherland.

"Hallo! here, Shoutnight; hallo! wake up; anybody at home?" said the magpie, holding his head very much on one side, and peeping with one eye at a time into the snug place where the fuzzy old gentleman used to bring his mice home. "Hallo! here," he continued, throwing in a small lump of mortar, which woke up the owl with a start.

"Who-hoo-hoo-hoo?" shouted the master of the house.

"Who-who tu-who-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo?" shouted the mistress.

"Ciss-s-s—phistle—phut-snap," chorused the juveniles, who had been disturbed by their mamma, treading upon one, scratching another on the side of the head, and giving number three such a crack with her wing that the little fellow was knocked out of

the nest into an old sooty part of the chimney, and came back such a little guy that his mother hardly knew him.

"Who-who-oo-oo-oo?" said the owl again.

"Who? who? who? why, whom do you suppose, but all your cousins of Featherland, come to give you a call?" said the magpie.

Whereupon the old gentleman came forth in a very dignified way, with his wife's spectacles on his nose, and then, because he could not see a bit, stood winking and blinking and nodding his great head, and bowing, and sticking up his feathers, like a stupid old turkey-cock, till he looked so majestic and imposing, that it was decided at once that he must come into the cedar and try the foreigner, who would not have a chance to get off with such a judge before him.

Off went the owl with a heavy flap-flap, and across the garden to where the great cedar stood; and away went the birds with such a flutter, rustle, and bustle, that the whole air whistled again as they swept away.

"Now, then, bolster-brains," said the starling to the jackdaw, "why, you've been asleep!" And there, sure enough, had sat the daw with his head in his pocket, and one leg put away for the present until he wanted it again.

"Asleep! nonsense!" said the daw. "Pooh—tchah! who ever heard of such a thing? Only thinking, my dear sir—only thinking; and I think so much better with my eyes shut and the light shaded from them."

"Why, you depraved descendant of a corvine ancestor; you grey-headed old miscreant," exclaimed the blackbird, who had been to look at the prisoner, "what have you done with the foreigner?"

"Done," said the daw, "done with the foreigner! No, of course I have not done with the foreigner, any more than the rest of the company have."

"But where is he?" chorused several birds; "where is he?"

"Ah!" said Judge Shoutnight, "who-oo-oo—ere's the prisoner?"

Over the hills and far away, with voice cleared by sucking the little birds' eggs, and crying "Cuckoo," till the far-off woods rang

back the echo from their golden green sides; and still on and on flew the sweet-voiced bird, crying that summer had come again with its hedge-side flowers and sweet-scented gales, bonny meadows, golden with the glossy buttercups, while nodding cowslips peeped from their verdant beds. "Cuckoo!" cried the bird, and away he flew again over the rich green pasture, where the lowing cows lazily browsed amongst the rich cream-giving grass, or crouched in their fresh, sweet banqueting-hall, and idly ruminated with half-shut eyes, flapping their great widespread ears to get rid of some early fly. And, still rejoicing in his liberty, the bird cried "Cuckoo! cuckoo!" over vale and lea.

Chapter Four.

"Peedle-Weedle-Wee."

"There, only hark at that," said Mrs Flutethroat; "who can possibly go to sleep with that noise going on—ding, ding, dinging in one's ears?" saying which the good dame took her head from beneath her wing, and smoothed down her feathers as she spoke. "There never was such a nuisance as those bottle-tits anywhere."

The noise that Mrs Flutethroat complained of proceeded from the low branches of a large fir-tree; and as the good dame listened the sounds came again louder than ever, "Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee," in a small, thready, pipy tone, as though the birds who uttered the cry had had their voices split up into two or three pieces.

"Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee," cried a row of little long-tailed birds, so small that they looked like little balls of feathers, with tiny black eyes and a black beak—so small that it was hardly worth calling a beak at all—stuck at one point, and a thin tail at the other extreme.

"Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee," they kept crying, which meant,—*"Let me come inside where it's warm;"* and as they kept on whining the same cry, the outside birds kept flitting over the backs of those next to them, and trying to get a middle place. Then the next two did the same, and the next, and the next, until they all had done the same thing, when they began again; and all the while that wretched, querulous piping "peedle-weedle-wee" kept on, till Mrs Flutethroat grew so angry, and annoyed and irritable, that she felt as though she

could have thrown one of her eggs at the tiresome little intruders on the peace of the garden.

"Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee," said the bottle-tits as busy as ever, trying to get the warmest spot.

"There they go again," said Mrs Flutethroat; "why don't you go somewhere else, and not make that noise there?"

"Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee," said the bottle-tits.

"Ah!" said Mrs Flutethroat, "I wish I was behind you, I'd make you say 'Peedle-wee-weedle—weedle-wee-peedle,' as you call it. I'd soon He after you, only it is so dark, and all my egg's would grow cold. Tchink-tchink-tchink," she cried, trying to fright them; but still they kept on "Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee" worse than ever; and, as it grew dark, it actually appeared as though they were coming nearer to the nest.

"There," she exclaimed at last, "I can't stand this any longer! Here, Flutethroat, wake up, do," she cried to her partner, who was sitting upon a neighbouring bough with his feathers erect all over him, and his head turned right under and quite out of sight. "Wake up, wake up, do," she cried again, trying to shake the boughs.

But Flutethroat could not wake up just then, for he was enjoying a most delightful dream: he was living in a country where there were no cats, nor any other living things but slugs, snails, and grubs; while all kinds of fruit grew in profusion, so that there was no difficulty in obtaining any amount of food; but one great drawback to his happiness was an ugly, misshapen little bird, which would keep running after him, and crying, "Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee," or else shouting at him to "wake up."

"Wake up, wake up," cried the voice.

"Get along with you, do," said Flutethroat.

"Peedle-weedle-wee, peedle-weedle-wee," cried the voice again.

"Oh! bother," said Flutethroat, slowly drawing his head out from beneath his wing, and finding that the voices were real, and plainly to be heard on both sides of the puzzled bird; for Mrs Flutethroat was crying out "Wake up, wake up," and the bottle-tits were squabbling more than ever for the warmest place.

"There, at last," said Mrs Flutethroat, "if you sleep after that fashion, that old green-eyed cat must have you some day, and I shall be made a disconsolate widow."

"Well, what's the matter?" said Flutethroat, opening his yellow bill quite an inch, and gaping dreadfully without putting a wing before his mouth.

"What's the matter?" said his mate crabbily. "Why, look at those nasty little feather-balls peedle-weedling; who can put up with it? They've no business there at all. They've been making that noise for half-an-hour."

"Well, go to sleep, and don't take any notice."

"But I can't; I've been trying ever so long, and they won't let me. Every now and then I think they have gone to sleep, but they only burst out worse than ever. There, hark at them; isn't it dreadful?"

"Heigho—he—ha—ha—hum—mum; yes, very," said Flutethroat. "Oh! dear; how sleepy I am!"

"Sleepy," said Mrs Flutethroat crossly; "so am I; then why don't you go and stop that dreadful noise?"

"How can I stop it? They have as good a right to be there as we have to be here; so we must not interfere with them."

"But you must stop it," said his wife, getting so cross that Flutethroat was obliged to say "Very well," and go slowly towards the fir-tree, where the tiny birds were sitting in a row, and when he got up to them there they were tired out and fast asleep; the last one awake having dropped off just as he was half through saying "weedle," and as he was going to hop over his neighbours' backs to get in the middle.

Flutethroat stopped to look at the little downy grey mites, and could not help thinking how pretty they looked; when he went back to the laurel bush, and found his mate fast asleep too; and so there was nothing else for it but to turn himself into a ball of feathers, which he quickly did; and then there was nought to be heard but the night breezes of early spring rustling through the half bare trees, and hurrying off to fetch water from the sea to drop upon the ground, so that flowers and grass might spring up, and earth look bright and gay once more.

"Kink-kink-kink," cried Flutethroat, darting through the shrubbery next morning, and rousing up his cousins, who were soon busy at work finishing their nest and getting everything in apple-pie order. How hard they all worked; fetching materials from all sorts of distant places, and picking only those of the most sober hues, such as would not attract the notice of those people who might be passing by; and then how carefully was every straw, or hair, or thread woven in and out and secured, so that the walls of the nests grew up neat, tight, and compact as possible, and all the while so tightly fastened that nothing short of great violence could move them from their place. As for the nests of Flutethroat and his cousins, they were so warmly plastered inside, that it might have been thought that they meant their little nests to be substantial houses to last them for years to come.

"Caw-aw—caw-aw—caw-aw," cried a rook up in the high limes.

"Caw-caw-caw-caw," cried all the rest of the rooks up in the high limes. And then such a chorus broke forth that the whole of Greenlawn was in a state of alarm, and called a meeting in the cedar to know what was the matter.

"There's somebody shot," said Mr Specklems, the starling.

"Nonsense," said the thrush; "there was no pop. It must be something much worse than that."

"Send some one to ask," said the jackdaw.

"Ah! to be sure," said everybody in chorus; and so it was decided that the jackdaw should go and see, and then come back and deliver his report.

Off he went; and all the time he was gone the birds in the cedar made a noise of their own, almost equal to that in the rookery, till the jackdaw came back looking so cunning and knowing, that every one could plainly see that nothing very serious was the matter.

As soon as he got up to his place in the cedar all the birds crowded round him to make inquiries; but the daw began to tease them, and wouldn't tell anything for a few minutes, and then in a half whisper he said something to the starling.

"Tchitch!" said Specklems, "is that all? why I'd have two dozen hatchings without making one half of that disturbance. Dear friends," he continued, turning round to the assembled birds,

"dear friends, it's a great to-do about nothing at all; for all that hullabaloo is because there are some young rooks hatched."

"Boo! oh! er! ah!" cried all the birds in all sorts of tones of disgust and annoyance. "What a shame.—Stupid things," and many other expressions of indignation at being startled about such a piece of rubbish, burst from the birds; and directly after there was a whirl, and a rush, for all the birds darted off in the greatest haste to get to their business again, to make up for lost time; and would not leave it afterwards although a jay flew over screaming harshly; and a stray hen got in the garden scratching the flower beds, and had to be hunted out; nor yet even when Mrs Puss came slinking down the garden, and round all the flower beds; for this was a terribly busy time, and every moment was of value, though certainly food began to be much more plentiful now the warm and genial sun began to shine longer every day, and made bud after bud burst into beautiful emerald green leaves, that made the trees cast a deeper shade, and began to conceal the nests—even those of the rooks up in the tall limes.

Chapter Five.

Pretty Pussy.

A nice job had Mr and Mrs Spottleover with their young ones; they were not amiable and dutiful children, but spent all their time in grumbling and shouting for more food, till they nearly drove the old folks mad, and Mrs Spottleover said she would never have been married if she had known; "no; that she wouldn't." Tiresome children hers were, for they were no sooner hatched, and lay at the bottom of the nest all eyes and mouth, with just a patch of grey woolly fluff stuck on their backs, than they began to open their great beaks, and gorge everything the old ones brought; till you would almost have thought they must have killed themselves; but they did not; they only grew; and that, too, at such a rate, that before they were fledged they used to push, crowd, and fight because, they said, the nest was too tight; and it was almost a wonder nobody fell overboard. Beautiful beaks they had, too, as they grew older, and sweet voices, that subsided into a querulous grumbling when the old birds had gone; but directly father or mother returned, tired and panting, to settle on the bush, up popped every bird, and strained every neck, and wide open sprang every beak, ready for the coming "slug, grub, or wire-worm."

"My turn—my turn—my turn—my turn," chorused the voices; ready to snap up the coming morsel like insatiable young monsters as they were; and this time it was a fine fat worm that Mrs Spottleover found on the grass plot far away from his hole, and had killed and then brought him in triumph to her little ones for breakfast.

"Now, one at a time, children; one at a time; don't be greedy," said dame Spottleover; and then she popped the beautiful, juicy, macaroni-like morsel into the beak of number one, who began to gobble it down for fear anyone else should get a taste; but number four saw a chance, and snapped hold of the other end of the worm and swallowed ever so much, till at last he and his brother had their heads close together; when they began to pull and quarrel—quarrel and pull—till Mrs Spottleover turned her own beak into a pair of scissors, snipped the disputed morsel in two, boxed both the offenders' ears, said she would take the worm away—but did not, as it was all gone—and then flew off for a fresh supply.

In came father with three green caterpillars fresh from off the cauliflowers, popped them in as many beaks, and he, too, flew off on his day's work to hunt out savoury morsels for his little tyrant-like children.

"I can fly," said number three; "I know I can. I mean to try soon, and get my own bits. I know I can."

"You can't," said one brother; "you can't. You would come down wop! and couldn't get up again. You ain't strong enough to fly yet."

"I am. I could fly ever so high; and I'd show you, if I liked, but I don't like."

"Ah! you're afraid."

"No; I'm not."

"Yes; you are."

"No; I'm not. There's a wing now," said the fledgeling, spreading out his half-penned pinion. "Couldn't I fly with that?"

"Oh!" roared the other disputant, "that's right in my eye. Oh, dear; oh, dear; won't I tell when mother comes back."

"Tchut, tchut, children," said the dame, flying to the nest; "quiet, quiet, there's the green-eyed tiger that killed your grandfather coming; so thank your stars that you are safe in the nest your father and I made for you; for yon wretch would, if it could, make mouthfuls of you all."

But Mrs Pussy with her striped sides, and long, lithe sweeping tail, did not know of the thrushes' nest, and so went quietly and softly down the path towards the hollow cedar-tree. Here and there lay a wet leaf or two; and when quiet Mrs Puss put her velvet paw on one it would stick to it, and set her twitching and shaking her leg till the leaf was got rid of, when she licked the place a little and went on again. Ah! so soft and smooth and velvety was Mrs Puss, looking as innocent as the youngest of kittens, and without a thought of harm to anybody. Walking along so softly, and not noticing anything with one eye, but keeping the other slyly fixed upon friend Specklems, who was high up on a dead branch, making believe to sing to his good lady, who was two feet deep in a hole of the cedar, sitting upon four beautiful blue eggs. And beautifully Specklems, no doubt, thought he sang, only to a listener it sounded to be all sputter and wheeze—chatter and whistle; but he kept on. All the while puss crept gently up to the trunk of the tree, only just to rub herself up against it, backwards and forwards; nothing more. But, somehow, Mrs Puss was soon up the trunk, and close to the nest-hole before the starling saw her; but he did at last, with her paw right down in the hole. "Now, thief," he shouted, perking himself up and looking very fierce; but all the while trembling lest puss should draw out his wife tangled up in the nesting stuff. "Now, come, out of that."

Mrs Puss gave a slight start, and peering up saw Specklems looking as fierce about the head as an onion stuck full of needles; but she did not draw forth her paw until she had, by carefully stretching it out as far as possible, found that she could not reach the nest.

"Dear me, how you startled me, Mr Specklems," she said; "who ever would have thought of seeing you there?" and then she began sneaking and sidling up towards the bird, of course with the most innocent of intentions; and though not in the slightest degree trusting Mrs Puss, Specklems sat watching to see what she would do next.

"It's a nice morning, isn't it?" she continued mildly, but at the same time drawing her wicked-looking red tongue over her thin lips as though she thought Specklems would be nicer than the morning. "It's a nice morning, isn't it? and how Do you do, my

dear sir? You see I am taking a ramble for my health. I find that I want fresh air; the heat of the kitchen fire quite upsets me sometimes, and then I come out for a stroll, and get up the trees just to hear the sweet warbling of the songsters."

"Humph!" said Specklems to himself, "that's meant for a compliment to my singing; but I know she's after no good."

"The kitchen was very, very hot this morning," continued Puss, "and so I came out." And this was quite true, for the kitchen *was* hot that morning—too hot to hold Mrs Puss, for cook had run after her with the fire-shovel for licking all the impression off one of the pats of butter, just ready for the breakfast parlour, and leaving the marks of her rough tongue all over the yellow dab, and hairs out of her whiskers in the plate; and then when cook called her a thief, she stood licking her lips at the other end of the kitchen, and looking so innocent, that cook grew quite cross, caught up the shovel, and chased puss round the kitchen, till at last the cat jumped up on cook's shoulder, scratched off her cap, and leaped up to the open skylight and got away; while poor cook was so frightened that she fell down upon the sandy floor in a fainting fit, but knocked the milk-jug over upon the table as she went down, which served to revive her, for the milk ran in a little rivulet right into one of the poor woman's ears, filled it at once like a little lake, and then flowed down her neck, underneath her gown, and completely soaked her clean white muslin handkerchief. And so Mrs Puss found the kitchen very hot that morning, and took a walk in the garden.

"Let me hear you sing again, sir," said Puss, creeping nearer and nearer. "That piece of yours, where you whistle first, and then make that sweet repetition, which sounds like somebody saying 'stutter' a great many times over very quickly. Now, do, now; you folks that can sing always want so much pressing."

Poor Specklems! he hardly knew what to do at first; but he had wit enough to be upon his guard while he sang two or three staves of his song.

By this time Puss had managed to creep within springing distance of poor Specklems; and just in the midst of one of her smooth oily speeches she made a jump, open-mouthed and clawed, but missed her mark, for the starling gave one flip with his wing and was out of reach in an instant, and then, with a short skim, he alighted on the thin branch of a neighbouring tree, where he sat watching his treacherous enemy, who had fared very differently. Crash went Mrs Puss right through the prickly branches of the cedar, and came down with her back

across the handle of the birch-broom, which still stuck in the tree, and made her give such an awful yowl, that the birds all came flocking up in time to see Mrs Puss go spattering down the rest of the distance, and then, as a matter of course, she fell upon her feet, and walked painfully away, followed by the jeers of all the birds, who heard the cause of her fall, while she went off spitting and swearing in a most dreadful manner, and looking as though her tail had been turned into a bottle-brush, just at the time her coat was so rough that it would be useful to smooth it.

Poor Mrs Puss, she nearly broke her back, and she went off to the top of the tool-shed, where the sun shone warmly, and there she set to and licked herself all over, till her glossy coat was smooth again, when she curled herself up in a ball and went fast asleep, very much to the discomfort of a pair of redstarts, who were busy building their nest under the very tile Mrs Puss had chosen for her throne.

"A nasty, deceitful, old, furry, green-eyed, no-winged, ground-crawling monster," said Mrs Specklems. "There I sat, with its nasty fish-hook foot within two or three inches of my nose, and there it was opening and shutting, and clawing about in such a way, that I turned all cold and shivery all over, and I'm sure I've given quite a chill to the eggs; and dear, dear, what a time they are hatching! Don't you think that if we were both to sit upon them they would be done in half the time? Here have I been sit-sit-sit for nearly twenty days down in that dark hole; and if we are to have any more such frights as that just now, why, I do declare that I will forsake the nest. The nasty spiteful thing, it ought to be pecked to death."

But Mrs Puss was not to go unpunished for her wrongful dealings; about half an hour after she had been asleep, who should come snuffing about in the garden but Boxer, the gardener's ugly, old rough terrier. He had no business at all in the garden, but had managed to get his chain out of the staple, and there he was running about, and dragging it all over the flower beds, and doing no end of mischief; then he made a charge at Mrs Spottleover, who was on the lawn, where she had just punched out a fine grub, but she was so frightened at Boxer's rough head and hair-smothered eyes, that she dropped her grub and went off in a hurry. Over and over went Boxer in the grass, having such a roll, and panting and lolling out his great red tongue with excitement, and then working away with both paws at his collar till he got it over his little cock-up ears, and then he gave his freed head such a shake that the ears

rattled again. Then away he went, sniffing here, snuffing there, jumping and snapping at the birds far above, and coming down upon the ground with all four legs at once, and racing about and playing such strange antics, capers, and pranks, that the birds all laughed at the stupid, good-natured-looking dog, and did not feel a bit afraid of him.

All at once Boxer gave a sharp sniff under the cedar-tree, just where Mrs Puss had tumbled down, and then sticking his ears forward, his nose down, and his tail straight up, he trotted off along the track Mrs Puss had made, until he came close to the tool-shed, where, looking up, he could just see a part of Pussy's shining fur coat leaning over the tiles. Now, Boxer was a very sly old gentleman, and when he saw the birds flocking after him to see what he would do, he made them a sign to be quiet, and put his paw up to the side of his wet black nose, as much as to say, "I know;" and then he trotted off to the melon frames, walked up the smooth sloping glass till he could jump on to the ivy-covered wall, where he nearly put his foot in the hedge-sparrow's nest, and so on along the top till he came to the tool-shed, where his enemy, Mrs Puss, lay curled up, fast asleep.

They were dreadful enemies were Mrs Puss and Boxer, for the cat used to go into the yard where the dog was chained up, and, after spitting and swearing at him, on more than one occasion took advantage of his being at the end of his chain, and keeping just out of his reach scratched the side of his nose, and tore the skin so that poor Boxer ran into his kennel howling with pain, rage, and vexation; while Mrs Puss, setting her fur all up, marched out of the yard a grander body than ever. And then, too, she used to get all the titbits out of the kitchen that would have fallen to Boxer's share; and he, poor fellow, used often to say to the robin-redbreast who came for a crumb or two, that the pieces he sometimes had smelt catty, from Puss turning them over and then refusing them, when they came to the share of the poor dog.

So Boxer never forgave the scratch on his nose, nor yet Mrs Puss's boast that he was afraid of her; so he walked softly along the wall, and on to the tool-shed, and with one bouncing leap came down plop upon the treacherous old grimalkin.

"Worry-worry-worry-ur-r-r-ry," said Boxer, as he got hold of Pussy's thick skin at the nape of her neck, and shook away at it as hard as he could.

"Wow-wow-wiau-au-au-aw," yelled Puss, wakened out of her sleep, and in vain trying to escape.

"Hooray!" said the birds, flying round and round in a state of the greatest excitement.

"Give it her, Boxer," shouted Mr Specklems, remembering the morning's treachery.

And then off they rolled on to the ground, and over and over, righting, howling, and yelling, till Mrs Puss made a desperate rush through a gooseberry bush, and a thorn went so sharply into Boxer's nose that he left go, and away went Puss across the garden till she came to the wall, and was scrambling up it, when Boxer had her by the tail and dragged her down again. But Puss made another rush towards the gate, dragging Boxer after her, till she came to the trellis-work opening, through which she dragged herself, and a moment after Boxer stood looking very foolish, with a handful of fur off Puss's tail in his mouth; while she, with her ragged ornament, was glad enough to sneak in-doors frightened to death, and get to the bottom of the cellar, where she scared cook almost into fits, by sitting upon a great lump of coal, with her eyes glaring like a couple of green stars in the dark.

"Wow-wow-wow—bow-wow-wuff," said Boxer at last, when he found that his enemy had gone. "Wuff-wuff," he said again, trying to get rid of the fur sticking about his mouth. "Wuff-wuff," he said, "that's better."

"Bravo!" chorused the birds, in a state of high delight; "well done, Boxer!"

"Ha-ha-ha; phut-phut-phut—wizzle-wizzle," said the starling off the top of the wall.

"Wizzle-wizzle, indeed," said Boxer grumpily; "why don't you come down, old sharp-bill, and pull this thorn out of my nose?"

"'Tisn't safe," said the starling.

"Get out," said Boxer; "why, what do you mean?"

"You'd get hold of my tail, perhaps," said Specklems.

"Ha-ha-ha," laughed all the birds; "that's capital, so he would."

"No, no; honour bright," said Boxer. "You never knew me cheat; ask Robin, there."

Whereupon the robin came forward in a new red waistcoat, blew his nose very loudly, and then said:—

"Gentlemen all, I could, would, should, and always have trusted my person freely with my friend—if he will allow me to call him so,"—here the robin grew quite pathetic, and said that often and often he had been indebted to his friend for a sumptuous repast, or for a draught of water when all around was ice; he assured them they might put the greatest trust in Boxer's honour.

Whereupon Boxer laid himself in the path, and the birds dropped down one at a time, some on the beds, some on the gooseberry or currant bushes, and formed quite a cluster round the great, rough, hairy fellow, for they felt perfectly safe after what the robin had said.

First of all, the starling examined the wound with great care, and said, "The thorn is sticking in it."

"Well, I knew that," said Boxer; "pull it out."

He spoke so sharply that every one jumped, and appeared as if about to fly off; but as the dog lay quite still, Speckle laid hold of the thorn, and gave a tug at it that made Boxer whine; but he did not get it out, so tried again.

"Some one come and lend a hand here," said the starling; and then two or three birds, one after another, joined wings and pulled away with a hearty "Yo, ho," until all at once out came the thorn, and down fell the haulers all in a heap upon the ground, where they fluttered and scrambled about, for their legs and wings had got so mixed up together that there was no telling which was which; and the only wonder was that the thrush did not come out of the scramble with the starling's wings, and the blackbird with somebody else's tail. However, at last they were all right again, and Boxer declared he was so deeply indebted to the birds that he must ask them all to his kennel in the yard to help him to eat his dinner next day.

Then the birds whistled and chattered, piped and sang; Boxer gave two or three barks and jumps off the ground to show his satisfaction, although his nose was bleeding; while all the time Mrs Puss sat alone in the coal-cellar, making use of most dreadful cat-language, and determining to serve the birds out for it some day.

When a proper amount of respect had been shown upon both sides, the birds flew off to their green homes, to attend to the wants of their young ones, and to finish nesting; while Boxer went back to his green kennel and made himself a nest amongst his clean straw.

Chapter Six.

The Tomtits.

It was all very well for Mrs Puss to get up the great cedar-tree and put her paw down the great hole, but if it had been the thorn-tree, that was just coming out all over beautiful white scented blossoms, hanging in long silvery wreaths, Mrs Puss would have found out her mistake. There was a hole there, and there was a nest in it, but pussy's paw could no more have gone down it than a cannon-ball would run through a tobacco-pipe. Such a tiny round hole; such a depth; and such a tiny little round pair of birds, with blue and white heads, green backs, and yellow breasts, with a black stripe down the centre; such tiny black beaks; in short, such a tiny pair of tits were Tom and Tomasina, who had made their nest right down at the bottom of this little hole. Bustling, busy little bodies they were, too, popping in and out with little bits of soft wool, down, or small feathers; and then, tiniest of all were first about a dozen morsels of eggs, and then the nest full of little callow birds, with all that dozen of little beaks up and open for food. In and out, in and out, till any one would have thought the little tomtit wings would have been tired out; but, no; in and out still, and backwards and forwards, bringing tiny grubs and caterpillars, and all manner of little insects in those little open beaks, to satisfy the craving little family at home. Tom-tit told his wife that he could not understand it, but thought that when they were mated all they would have to do would be to fly about the garden, hopping from twig to twig, and picking all the little buds through the long sunshiny days, and sleeping at night upon some high, safe bough, rolled up like little balls of feathers.

"Oh! but," said Mrs Tit, "only to think of it; such a tiny body as I am to have twelve children, and all the while that great gawky, Mrs Stockdove, only to have one, for the other she had rolled out of the nest and was killed."

"Nest," said Tom, "I never saw such a nest; nothing but a few sticks laid across one another. No wonder the poor little thing

rolled out; there was nothing to save it. But it is not every one who has so tidy and neat a little body for a wife as I have. So come, wifey, bustle about, for the children are all crying as though they had not eaten for a week; and I declare that I'm as hungry as any of them."

And away flew the little tits, ridding the garden of thousands of insect plagues, and clearing off nuisances that would have destroyed half the fruit and vegetables in the garden. As for the little crawling flies and other insects, it was wonderful how fast they were snapped up; and though people would say that Tom-tit and his wife did a great deal of mischief by pecking the buds, it was quite a mistake; for though they pecked the buds, it was almost always when some sly little insect had made itself a hole in the bud, where it would have laid eggs, and its young would have totally destroyed the tree. Todkins, the old gardener, used to be in a fine way about it, and laid all sorts of charges against not only Tom-tit but all the rest of the birds, and used to want to set traps, and spread poisoned wheat, and get guns to shoot them with; but the master of Greenlawn would not let him; so the old man used to grumble and say there would be no fruit and no vegetables, for the birds would eat everything up, seed, fruit, and all. But the master of Greenlawn knew best, for he thought that if the birds were killed or frightened away, the insects, and grubs, and caterpillars, and slugs, and snails, and all sorts of other uncomfortable things, would come and eat the fruit and vegetables, and eat them all up, while the birds would be sure to leave some. And, sure enough, he was quite right, for somebody else, who used to kill and frighten away all the birds, had all his crops destroyed; while at Greenlawn, where there were hundreds and hundreds of birds, there was always plenty of fruit and vegetables; for the birds very seldom touched the fruit if they could get plenty of other food. Certainly sometimes Mr Sparrow used to pick out the finest and ripest cherries, or have a good peck at a juicy pear. The starlings, too, would gobble down the elder-berries, and sometimes the greenfinches used to go to see how the radish seeds were getting on, and taking tight hold of the thread-like shoots, pull them out of the ground, and leave them upon the top of the bed, fast asleep, for they never grew any more. Still, take it altogether, there was always twice as much fruit where there were plenty of birds, as where they were all driven away.

Chapter Seven.

An Odd Stranger.

There was one bird used to run about Greenlawn on a fine morning, hunting for tiny spiders and flies; he was a little, slim, dapper fellow, with a long tail, and whenever he jumped about a little way, or settled upon the ground, he used to make his long tail go wipple-wapple, up and down, as if he had shaken it loose; but it was only a funny habit of his, like that of Mrs Hedgesparrow, who was always shaking and shuffling her wings about. A fast runner was Mr Wagtail, and fine fun it was to see him skimming along the top of the ground in chase of a fly to take home to his wife, who used to live in a nest in the bank close by the hole over the pond, where old Ogrebones—blue-backed Billy the kingfisher, had his house, and used to spread the bones of his fishy little victims about the grass.

One day Walter Wagtail was running along the ground after a fly, and was going to snap him up, when—"bob"—he was gone in an instant; and Wagtail found himself standing before—oh! such an ugly thing, with two bright, staring eyes; a bloated, rough, dirty-looking body; four crooked legs, no neck, no wings, no tail, and such a heavy stomach, that he was obliged to crawl about with it resting upon the ground.

"Heugh! you horrid, ugly-looking thing," said Wagtail; "you swallowed my fly. Where do you come from? what's your name? who's your father and mother, and what made you so ugly?"

"Ugly, indeed," said the pudgy thing; "what do you mean by ugly? Just you go to the bottom of the pond and lie under the mud, old fluffy-jacket, and stop there for a week, and see how you would look with your fine gingerbread black and white feathers sticking to your sides all muddy and wet. Who would look ugly then? Not you! oh no."

"But I shouldn't be such a round, rough, clay-tod as you are, old no-neck," said the wagtail, ruffling his feathers up at the very idea of getting them damp.

"No, you wouldn't, you miserable whipper-snapper," croaked the other, settling himself down on the flowerbed, so that he could hardly be told from the ground for colour. "No, you wouldn't, but you would be—ho-ho-ho—you would be—ha-ha-ha—such a—he-he-he—such a—haw-haw-haw. There, I can't help laughing," said the round fellow, with his fat sides wagging about through his merriment. "You must excuse me, but I do think you would look so comical with all your feathers gummed

down to your skinny sides, that wisp of a tail like a streak of horsehair, and those stilty legs sticking into your scraggy body—ho-ho-ho-ho—my fat sides! How I wish I had ribs, for then I could stop laughing easier; but you are such a droll little chap.”

“Get out,” said the bird, wagging his tail with fury, for he was very proud of his genteel appearance; “get out, you old dusky dab, or I shall kick you. I feel quite disgusted with your appearance. What are you doing here?”

“Doing?” said the other, rubbing the tears out of his eyes; “doing? why, getting my living the same way as you do—fly-catching.”

“Fly-catching,” said the other with a sneer; “how can you catch flies? Why, you can’t run a bit. I suppose you wait till they tumble into your mouth, don’t you? Who are you? What’s your name?”

“My name?” said the other; “well, you are not very civil, but I don’t mind telling you. My name’s Toad—Brown Toad—and I’d a great deal rather be such an ugly fellow, as you call me, than a weazen, skinny, windbeater like you. How do I catch flies? Why, so, my boy; that’s how I catch them,” and just then the toad crept to within two or three inches of a great fly that had settled upon a leaf, darted out his long tongue, which stuck to the fly, and it was drawn into the toad’s great mouth in an instant. “That’s the way I catch flies, my boy, and a capital way too, isn’t it?”

“Hum,” said the wagtail, rather astonished at the ease with which the fly was caught; “it wasn’t so bad, certainly; but you know you are precious ugly. Why, you have no waist.”

“Waste!” said the toad, “no, there’s no waste about me; it’s all useful what there is of me.”

“Ugh! you stupid,” said the other; “I mean *waist* over your hips, where you ought to wear your belt or sash.”

“Oh! ah! I see,” said the toad. “No, I’ve no waist, and don’t want any, but I know a little chap that has; he’s a little black and yellow fellow, who goes buzzing about, making a fine noise, and likes sweet things; he’d suit you, only he has *such* a tickler in his tail. His name’s Wops, or Wasp, or something of that kind.”

"Oh! I know the conceited little plum-stealer; he's poisonous, like you are."

"Pooh!" said the toad, "poisonous! I'm not poisonous. I'm not even ill-tempered, so as to poison people's minds, much more poison their bodies. That's an old woman's tale; they say I spit poison, because they've seen me catch flies; and are stupid enough, like you, to think me ugly, just as if that made any difference. I creep about here and catch my flies, and enjoy myself well enough."

"But you can't fly," said the wagtail vainly; "I can."

"Pooh! I know," said the toad; "and you can't swim. I can."

"But you can't run and catch flies," said the other, getting cross.

"No, but I can sit down and catch them," said the toad, "and that's easier."

"Boo! old bark-back; where's your tail?" said the wagtail, now quite cross to find that the ugly old toad was quite as clever as he, and a deal better-tempered.

"Tail," said the other contemptuously; "what's the use of a tail only to wag? Do you want me to pull it?" And then he made believe that he was going to get hold of the wagtail's long feathers, but the bird flew off in a fright, thoroughly vexed and disappointed, because the nasty, black-looking, rough toad could beat him in everything he said.

Chapter Eight.

Ogrebones.

Away went the wagtail—flit-flit-flit—down to the pond where the water-lilies grew, and began running about over them to catch the gnats that were dancing over the glassy water; and there again he had a fright, for he saw close to his feet, by the edge of a large leaf, a green nose, just the shape of the toad's. However, he had presence of mind to say, "Who are you?"

"Croak," said the green nose, and dived under the water; and then the wagtail saw that it was a light-green thing, with longer legs than the toad, and that it swam to the bottom and stopped.

Just then old OGREBONES, the kingfisher, came skimming along like a blue flash over the pond, and he settled on a twig near his hole in the bank.

"Morning, neighbour," said he to the wagtail. "How are flies this morning?"

"Scarce, very scarce," said the wagtail. "There was a poacher out on my place catching the poor things with a machine, which he shot at them. One of the lowest-looking, rough customers you ever saw. He said his name was Brown Toad, and quite insulted me about my figure,—an ugly, pumpkin—shaped, pod-nosed thing."

"Oh! I know him," said the kingfisher; "I often meet his first cousin down here in the pond when I'm diving. They're a low lot; a cold-blooded set; but what can you expect from a thing whose eggs are soft, and left to hatch themselves? Why, they are only tadpoles at first."

"You don't say so?" said the wagtail, who had not the least idea what a tadpole was, unless it was the pole the gardener used to pull the weeds out of the pond with. "You don't say so?"

"O yes!" said OGREBONES; "it's a fact; I tried to eat one once, but couldn't get on with it at all. You see, I'm an English bird, and not French, so that I cannot manage frog."

"Of course not; I see," said the wagtail.

But the kingfisher did not stop to hear him out, for all of a sudden he sprang up, poised himself a moment in the sunny air, and then darted into the water, from whence he presently emerged, bearing a little struggling fish in his great beak, and with the sparkling drops of water running off his back, and leaving his bright glossy blue feathers all dry, shining, and bright, as though he had only been for a flight through the air.

"There," said OGREBONES, "I've got him this time, and not without trying. I've missed this little chap twice over, but when once Mrs K inside there takes him in hand, he will have no chance; for it will be eggs and crumb, and frying-pan with him in no time."

So then old OGREBONES disappeared within his hole; Wagtail betook himself to his nest to relate his morning's experiences to the patient Mrs Wagtail, who, like many other friends and relatives, was busy keeping her eggs warm; and so the pond

was for the moment vacated by the birds; but it was not alone for all that, for a pretty place was that pond, just at the bottom of Greenlawn—a pond rich in life of all kinds; this was where the blue-eyed forget-me-not was always peeping up at the passers-by; there grew the yellow water-lily floating amongst its great dark green leaves, like a golden cup offered by the water fairies for drinking the clear crystal liquid. The white water-buttercups, too, glistened over the shallow parts, with such crisp brown water-cresses in between, as would have made a relish to the bread and butter of a princess. All round the edges was a waving green fringe of reeds and rushes—bulrushes with their brown pokery seed-vessels—plaiting rushes with their tasselled blossoms—and reeds with graceful drooping feathery plumes waving in the soft summer air. Down in the depths of the pond glided by the silvery little fish, glistening and bright; while on the surface skimmed no end of insects: shiny beetles forming patterns on the water as they dodged in and out, and round and round in their play; long-legged insects that ran over the water as though it were a hard road; while darting about in all their metallic brightness and on gauzy wings flitted the dragon-flies, blue, green, and blue and green—now settling upon the end of some reed, now careering in mid air, now poised motionless with wings invisible in their rapid beat, now disturbed by the buzz of some great humble-bee, and then round and round and up and down in pursuit of one of their own tribe, till the gauzy wings beat together and rustled as they came in contact. Butterflies, white, yellow, blue, orange-spotted, tortoise-shell, peacock-eyed, and laced, came there to flit over the glassy water, and look within it at their beauty; and here, too, came the mayflies to dance up and down all the day, and die when even came. There never was such a pond anywhere else; for here came the martins and swallows, with their glossy black backs, to skim and dip and drink the water in their rapid flight; here they feasted on flies and gnats; and now and then came the squealing, sooty swift, with his long knife-blade wings, and tiny hand-like feet, to whisk away some heedless fly. The swallows above all liked the pond, and used to sit upon the dead branch of the weeping-willow to twitter and sing after their fashion for half-an-hour together. Old OGREBONES was the great man of the place; but, in the cool of the evening, out would come sailing from the midst of the little reed island, and flicking their round stumpy tails, the moor hens swimming away, to the great disgust of the white ducks, who said they were only impostors, and had no business to swim, because they had no webs to their feet, but only long straggling toes. And what ducks those were! white as snow, with red legs; and often and often they would put their beaks in the soft warm white feathers

on their backs and sit upon the water for hours together. All the birds loved the pond, and would fly down of a morning to have a regular splash and wash; flicking the water about with their wings, and sending it flashing and sparkling ever so high in the air, and making the little black tadpoles or pod-noddles go scuffling off into the deeper water. This was the place that old Boxer loved, and when he could get a chance he would go and wet his feet, and rustle about in amongst the reeds, and pretend to go in the water to swim after the ducks, but always turning back when he got in up to his body.

Chapter Nine.

A Tall Gentleman.

"Hum!" said Mrs Spottleover one morning to Mrs Flutethroat, after they had been having a wash in the bright pure water. "Hum!" she said, looking at the duck's brood of little downies swimming about after her, and one of them with a bit of shell sticking to its back. "Hum! yes, pretty well, but why yellow?"

"Ah! my dear, they will come white; they're not bleached yet. But they are strong, aren't they? Look at the little ones, now, only four hours old, and feeding themselves! Don't you wish yours would? Only think of the trouble they give before they can feed alone!"

"Well!" said Mrs Spottleover, "that's all very well, but, after all, those little downy balls take as much looking after as our little ones; and then only think of one's child growing up to say nothing better than 'Quack-quack,' besides being flat-nosed and frog-footed. Depend upon it, my dear, things are best as they are!"

"Well, I suppose you are right," said Mrs Flutethroat; "but I must not stay here gossiping, for I have no end of work to do this morning." Saying which the hen blackbird shook out her long dusky wings, cried "Pink-pink-pink," and flew off to the laurel bush to attend to her little ones; while the thrush hopped up into a tree to see how the haws were getting on, and whether there would be a good crop for the winter.

Just then there was a great shadow passed over the pond, and the ducklings splashed through the water, because they were so frightened, and then flop-flop, flip-flop, flip-flop, there came old

Shadowbody, the heron, to the pond, and pitched down by the haunt of the kingfisher, where he stood with his long stilty legs half in the water, his great floppy wings doubled up close to his sides, and his long neck squeezed between his shoulders all of a bundle; and there he stood looking as though he were going to sleep; but not a bit of it, old Shadowbody, or Bluescrags, as some of the saucy young birds called him, did not stand by the side of a pond to go to sleep, but to look after his dinner.

By-and-by the ducklings, seeing that the heron did not move, came nearer to him; and at last a little white fly went sailing along under his beak, and two ducklings set off on a race over the surface of the pond to see which would get the little white fly; and so busy were they that they forgot all about the great heron, and went up close to him, splashing him all over with the bright sparkling water.

"Take that, you ugly little downy dab," said the heron in a pet. "Do you think I came here to be made a water-mop of? Get out with you! see how you've wetted my waistcoat. Take that!"

And the poor little duckling did take *that*, and scampered off to its mother, crying out in such a pitiful voice, "Wheedle-wheedle-wheedle," that the heron forgot his ill-humour and burst out laughing, and felt quite sorry that he had given poor little Yellow-down such a cruel poke in its back with his long sharp beak.

"Serve it right, though," said the heron; "coming splashing, and dashing, and sending the water all over a sedate, quiet gentleman, quietly fishing by the side of a pond! And a nice pond it seems too, with plenty of fish in it. It strikes me I shall often come here."

Just then Bluescrags made a poke at a fish, and caught it in his long bill, and gobbled it up in no time. But he was not to enjoy himself long, for the duck was telling all her neighbours about the ill-usage her little one had received; and the mischief-making little wagtail thought as he had seen the lanky bird eating what he called the kingfisher's fishes, he would go and tell, and then sit on the bank and see the quarrel there would be; for he considered that the heron had no more business to take the fish out of the pond than the toad had to catch flies. So he ran to the blue bird's hole, and sticking in his little thin body, he ran up it to the nest, shouting, "Neighbour, neighbour; thieves, thieves!"

"Where, where?" said Ogrebones the kingfisher.

"Here; running away with your fish by the dozen," said the wagtail.

"Well, get out of the way," said the kingfisher, bustling out of the nest and going towards the mouth of the hole. "There, do make haste."

But the wagtail couldn't make haste, for his tail was so long he could not turn round in the hole, and so had to walk backwards the best way he could, with the points of his tail-feathers catching against the wall and sending him forwards upon his beak, and making the old kingfisher so crabby, that at last he gave the poor wagtail a dig with his heavy beak that made him cry out, "Peek-peek-peek."

"Then why don't you get out of the way, when all one's fish are being taken and stolen?"

Now the wagtail thought this very strange behaviour, when he had taken the trouble to let old OGREBONES know, and so he very wisely made up his mind never to interfere with other people's business again; for, said he, as he got out of the hole at last, "I don't know but what the heron has as good a right to the fish as old surly has; at all events, I'll never fetch him out any more."

Out bounced the kingfisher—"Here! hi! I say! you, there! what are you after, impudence? Do you know that you are poaching?"

"Eh?" said the heron, looking at the showy little bird that was flitting round him with his feathers sticking up, and looking as though he were in a terrible passion; "Eh?" said the heron, "what's poaching?"

"What's poaching, ignoramus? why, taking other people's fish. Don't you know who I am?" said the kingfisher, sitting upon a spray and looking very self-satisfied and important.

"No," said the heron; "I don't know you. But you are not a bad-looking little fellow; only you are small—very small. Why, where are your legs?"

"Come, now," said OGREBONES, "none of your impudence, old longshanks. I'm the king—the kingfisher; and I order you off; so go at once."

"Ho-ho-ho," laughed the tall bird. "And pray who made you a king? I'm not going to be driven off by such a scrubby little

thing as you, even if you have got such grand feathers on your back. Why, if I were to shut my bill upon your neck, that head of yours would drop off regularly scissored, and then you'd be just such a king as Charles the First."

"Oh, dear!" said the kingfisher, "only hark at him! I never heard such a character before in my life."

"He nearly killed one of my little ones," quacked the duck, coming up.

"Stuck his beak in my back," said a frog, putting his nose out of the water; and then seeing that the heron was going to make a dart at him, "Ouf," said he, popping down again in a hurry, and never stopping until had crept close down to the bottom of the pond where he crept under the weeds, and lay there all day, lost frightened to death.

"Keep your little flat bills at home, ma'am," said the heron. "But really," he said politely, "I did not know they were yours, or I should not have done so; but who would have thought that those little yellow dabs were children of such a beautifully white and graceful creature as you are?"

Whereupon the duck blushed, and spread one of her webbed feet before her face, and looked quite pleased at the compliment.

"Don't listen to him," croaked the kingfisher, backing into his hole; "he's a cheat, and a bad character, and thief, and a—"

But the heron here made a poke at his royal highness with his great scissors bill, and the kingfisher scuffled out of sight in a fright, having learnt the lesson that a small tyrant, however grandly he may dress, is not always believed in; for with all his bright colours and gaudy plumes he was no match for the great sober-hued, flap-winged heron, who only laughed at him, and all his grand swaggering; and, as soon as he was gone, settled himself down to his work, and caught fish enough for a good meal, for he felt quite certain that he had as good a right to the fish as the little king, who had had it his own way so long that he thought everybody would give way to him.

Poke went the heron's bill, and out came a finny struggler; but it was no use to kick, for Bluescrags never left go when once he had hold of a fish, and he was just gobbling it down when—

"Hillo-ho-ho-o-o," cried a voice, and looking towards the place from whence the sound proceeded, the heron, as he rose from the ground, saw a man holding upon his hand a large sharp-winged bird, with a cruel-looking mouth, like that belonging to Hookbeak, the hawk, who sometimes passed over the garden, and such bright yellow and black piercing eyes, that as soon as Bluescrags felt their glance meet his, he turned all of a shiver, and his feathers began to ruffle up as though he were wet. But there was no time to shiver or shake, for the great bird was coming after him at a terrible rate, every beat of his pointed wings sending him dashing through the air, and in another moment the strange, fierce bird would have had the sharp claws he stretched out in the poor heron, but for the sudden and frantic effort he made to escape.

All this while Mrs Flutethroat was crying, "Pink-pink-pink" in the shrubbery, in a state of the greatest alarm, for a man had passed by the place where she was teaching her young ones to fly, carrying a bird on his gloved hand; while the bird had a curious cap upon its head, so contrived that it could not see anything; but the blackbird could see its yellow legs and cruel hooked claws that were stuck tightly into the thick glove the man wore.

"Well," said Mrs Flutethroat, "I'm very glad he's a prisoner, for the nasty, great, cruel-looking thing must be ten times worse than Hookbeak, the hawk, and if it were let loose here we should all be killed. Pink-tchink-chink," she cried in alarm; for just then the man, who was a falconer, took his bird's hood off, and shouted at the heron by the pond. The great flap-winged bird immediately took flight, and then, with a dash of its wings, away went the falcon, leaving Mrs Flutethroat shivering with fear.

Flip-flap, flap-flip-flop went the heron's wings over the water; flip and skim went the falcon's, and then away and away over the woods and fields went the two birds, circling round and round, and higher and higher; the falcon trying to get above the heron, so as to dart down upon him and break his wings; and the heron, knowing that as long as he kept up the falcon could not touch him, trying his best to keep the higher. At last the swift-winged bird darted upwards, and hovering for a moment over the poor heron, who cried out with fear, darted down with a rush, and went so close that he rustled through the quill feathers of the heron; and so swift was the dart he made, that he went down—down far enough before he could stop himself, and then when he looked up again, he saw that the heron had

risen so high that there was no chance of catching him again; so off he flew, and perched in the cedar-tree at Greenlawn, where he sat cleaning and pruning his feathers, and sharpening his ugly hooked beak till it had such a point that it would have been a sad day for the poor bird who came in his clutches; while his master, who had lost sight of him, was wandering away far enough off, whistling to him to come back to his perch.

Chapter Ten.

Flayem, the Falcon.

However, he was not left there long in peace, for the birds of Greenlawn did not like such visitors; and the first notice they had of the stranger was from Specklems, the starling, who flew up into the tree, and then out again as though a wasp had stuck in his ear.

"Chur-chair-chark," he shouted, flying round and round, spitting and sputtering, and making his head look like a hedgehog. "Chur-chair-r-r-r," he cried, and very soon the whole of the birds in the neighbourhood were out to see what it all meant.

"Now then, what's the matter?" said the magpie, coming up all in a hurry. "Whose eggs are broken now? Anybody's little one tumbled out of the nest into Mrs Puss's mouth, for me to get the blame?"

"Look—look in the cedar," shouted the birds; and up in the cedar went the magpie with his long tail quivering with excitement, and down he came again with his tail trembling with fright.

"Why didn't you say who it was in the tree?" said the magpie. "Oh! my stars and garters, how out of breath I am. Going about in such a hurry always puts me in a tremble. Oh no! I'm not afraid, not the least bit in the world, it's being out of breath."

"Well, go up and drive the old hook-nosed thing away," said the blackbird; "he's no business here, and we *are* all afraid; ain't we birds?"

"Yes! yes! scared to death," chorused all the birds.

"Come, up you go," said the blackbird; "there's a good fellow."

But the magpie stood on one leg and put a long black claw by the side of his beak in a very knowing manner, and then he said, with his head all on one side, "How do I know that he won't bite?"

"Why, we thought you said that you were not afraid," said the birds.

"Not the least in the world, gentlemen," said Mag; "but my wife's calling me, and I must go, or really I should only be too happy to oblige you. Another time you may depend upon me. Good-bye, gentlemen, *good-bye*."

And before the birds had time to speak again, the cowardly magpie gave three or four hops across the lawn, and then spread out his wings, and went off in a hurry—telling a story into the bargain, for his wife might have called for a week, and he could not have heard so far-off. But Maggy was dreadfully afraid, and, like many people in the world, he was ashamed to show it, and so made a very lame-legged excuse, and ran away.

"Ha-ha-ha," said the birds, "why, that's worse than being afraid and showing it. Why, he's ever so much bigger than we are, and has claws sharp enough for anything. Why, he pinched one of old mother Muddle-dab's ducklings to death with his great black nails."

"Well, what's to be done now?" said Specklems, "I'm not going to have him in my tree, and I won't either. I've a good mind to run at him with my sharp bill and stick it into him; and I would, too, if I was sure he wouldn't hurt me. Wouf!" said the starling, fiercely, and making a poke at nothing; "wouf! couldn't I give it him!" And then he stuck his little pointed feathers up again, and stood on the tips of his toes with a look as fierce as a half-picked chicken.

"Of course, gentlemen, it isn't for such a quiet mournful body as me to say anything," said the dove, "but I can't help thinking that the tree is as much mine as Mr Specklems'; but we won't quarrel about that, for just now it belongs to somebody else, and I feel very uncomfortable about my young ones. Suppose Mr Specklems goes and gives the great staring, goggle-eyed thing a poke; I'm sure I wish he would."

"I should just like to pickaxe him with my mortar-chipper," said an old cock-sparrow. "I'd teach him to come into other people's trees without being asked."

"Let's ask him civilly to go," said the wren.

"Let's shout at him, and frighten him," said the owl.

"Say 'Ta-ta' to him, and then he'll go," said the jackdaw.

"Why, we're not afraid, after all," said all the birds together;
"let's all have a fly at him at once and beat him off."

"Who'll go first?" said the jackdaw.

"Why, I will," said the tomtit.

And then all the birds burst out laughing so heartily at the tiny little fellow's offer, that he grew quite cross, and told the birds to come on; and then he flew into the cedar, and before the great falcon knew what he was going to do, Tom-tit dashed at him, and gave him such a peck with his little sharp beak, that the falcon jumped off his perch and stared about him; and then, before he could find out what was the matter, the jackdaw flew up above him, and came down head over heels on his back; the owl shouted "Who-o-who-o" in his ear; the blackbird and thrush stuck their beaks in his stomach; the sparrows poked him in the back; and the martins and swallows darted round and round him, and under and over, and all the other birds whistled and chattered and fluttered about him at such a rate, that at last the falcon didn't know whom to attack, and was regularly mobbed out of the garden, and flew off with a whole stream of birds after him, and he, in spite of his sharp claws and beak, glad to get out of the way as fast as he could.

At last the birds all flew back again, and settled down amongst the bushes on Greenlawn, and chirruped and laughed to think how they had driven away the great hook-beaked enemy, when who should come down into their midst but the magpie, all in a hurry and bustle, and looking as important as if all the place belonged to him.

"Now, then, here I am again," said he. "She only wanted my opinion about our last eggs, and I've hurried back as fast as I could to drive away this great hook-beaked bird that frightened you all so. I suppose I had better go up at once, hadn't I? But where shall I send him to?"

And there the great artful bird stood pretending that he had not seen the falcon driven off, and that he had come back on purpose to scare it away. But it would not do this time, for although there were some of the little birds who believed in the

magpie, and thought him a very fine fellow, yet the greater part of those present burst out laughing at him, and at last made him so cross that he called them a pack of idiots, and flew off in a pet, feeling very uncomfortable and transparent, and cross with himself as well, for having been such a stupid, deceitful thing. While the wiser birds made up their minds never to be deceived by the sly bird again; for before this he had had it all his own way, because he was so big, and everybody thought that he was brave as well; but now that he had been put to the test, he had proved himself to be an arrant coward, and only brave enough to fight against things smaller than himself.

Chapter Eleven.

The Little Warbler.

"Sky-high, sky-high, twitter-twitter, sky-high-higher-higher," sang the lark, and he fluttered and circled round and round, making the air about him echo again and again with the merry song he was singing—a song so sweet, so bright and sparkling, that the birds of Greenlawn stopped to listen to the little brown fellow with the long spurs and top-knot, whistling away "sweet and clear, sweet and clear," till he rose so high that the sounds came faintly, and nothing could be seen of him but a little black speck high up against the edge of the white flecky cloud; and still the sweet song came trilling down so soft and clear, that the birds clapped their wings and cried "Bravo!" while the jackdaw said he would take lessons from the lark in that style of singing, for he thought it would suit his voice, and then he was quite offended when the thrush laughed, but begged pardon for being so rude. And then, while the birds were watching the lark, he began to descend; slowly, and by jerks, every time sending forth spurts from the fountain of song that gushed from his little warbling throat; and then down, lower and lower still, singing till he was near the ground, when, with one long, clear, prolonged note, he darted down, falling like a stone till close to the grass, when he skimmed along for some distance, and then alighted in a little tussock of grass that stood by itself in the field, which came close up to Greenlawn, and ran right down to the farther edge of the pond. And what was there in the tussock of grass but a tiny cup-like nest in the ground, lined with dry grass, and covered snugly over by the lark's little brown wife, who was keeping the little ones warm, while her husband had been up almost out of sight in the bright sunny air singing her

one of his sweetest songs,—a song so sweet that the birds had all stayed from their work to listen.

And this is what he sang—the song that made his little mate's black beady eyes twinkle and shine as she sat in the tussock; for she felt so proud to think how her mate could warble:—

“Low down, low down, sitting in the tussock brown,
Little mate, the sky is beaming; little mate, earth wears no frown.
Higher, higher; higher, higher; toward the cloudflecks nigher, nigher,
Round and round I circle, singing; higher, higher ever winging;
Over meadow, over streamlet,
Over glistening dew, and beamlet
Flashing from the pearl-hung grasses,
Where the sun in flashes passes;
Over where sweet matey's sitting;
Ever warbling, fluttering, flitting;
Praising, singing—singing, praising;
Higher still my song I'm raising.
Sky-high, sky-high; higher—higher—higher—higher,
Little matey, watch your flier;
Sweet—sweet—sweet—sweet—sweet—sweet—sweet—sweet;
Here the merry breezes meet,
Where I twitter, circling higher,
Watch me flying higher, higher.
Low down, low down, nestling in the tussock brown,
Little mate, I'm coming down.”

“Well, that beats the owl hollow,” said Mr Specklems to his wife. “I think I could sing as well myself though, if it was not for this constant feeling of having a cold. There must have been a draught where I was hatched, and I've never recovered it. I can't think how he manages to sing and fly too at the same time: I can't. Why, I should be out of breath in no time.”

“There, don't be a booby,” said his wife; “you are not a song-bird at all. I heard the crow say we were distant relations of his, and no one would for a moment think that he was a singer.”

“Hark at her now!” said Specklems, “not a singer; why, what does she call that?” And then the vain little bird whistled and sputtered and cizzled away till he was quite out of breath, when his wife laughed at him so merrily, but told him that she liked

his whistle better than the finest trill the skylark ever made; and so then Specklems said that after all he thought the crow might be right, but, at all events, the Specklems could do something better than cry "Caw-waw" when they opened their beaks.

Just then who should come buzzing along but a wasp, a regular gorgeous fellow, all black and gold, and with such a thin waist that he looked almost cut in two.

"Now then, old spiketail," said the starling, "keep your distance; none of your stinging tricks here, or I'll cut that waist of yours in two with one snip."

"Who wants to sting, old peck-path?" said the wasp. "It's very hard one can't go about one's work without being always sneered and jeered and fleered at by every body."

"Work," said the starling, "ho-ho-ho, work; why, you don't work; you're always buzzing about, and idling; it's only bees that work and make honey."

"There now," said the wasp, "that's the way you people go on: you hear somebody say that the bees are industrious and we are idle, and then you believe it, and tell everybody else so, but you never take the trouble to see if it's true; and so we poor wasps have to go through the world with a bad name, and people say we sting. Well, so we do if we are touched; and so do bees too, just as bad as we do, only the little gluttons make a lot of sweet honey and wax, and so they get all the praise."

And then away went the little black-and-yellow fellow with his beautiful gauzy wings shining in the sun, and he flew over the garden wall, and was soon scooping away at a ripe golden-yellow plum that was hanging from the wall just ready to pick; and then off he flew again to his nest, where dozens more wasps were going in and out of the hole in a fallen willow-tree, all soft like touchwood, and in it the wasps had scooped out such a hole, where they had been working away quite as hard and industriously as the bees their cousins; and here they had made comb, and cells, and stored up food, and instead of their cells being made of wax, they were composed of beautiful paper that these busy little insects had made. There were grubs, too, and eggs that would turn to grubs, and afterwards to wasps; and here the wasps worked away, in and out all day, as busy as could be. But they had a very hard life of it, for everyone was trying to kill the poor things, and set traps for them to tumble into and be smothered in sweet stuff. But though people did not

think so, the wasps did a great deal of good, and among other things they killed a great many tiresome little flies that were always buzzing and humming about; and the wasps went after them and caught them by the back, and then snipped off their wings and head, and flew off and ate the best parts of them up.

Chapter Twelve.

Busy Bees.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine round-topped straw hives there were at Greenlawn—hives full of such rich, thick honey, and such beautiful combs, and all about these round heavy hives the bees would hum and buzz of a hot day, flying in and out loaded with honey and pollen; and outside some of the hives the bees would hang down like great pockets made of insects, all hanging to one another; and there they hung, getting ready to swarm and fly off to a new home; but they did not know how to choose one for themselves, for they would only fly off to a tree and hang there all of a lump, when the master of Greenlawn would take a nice, clean, sweet hive and sweep them all into it, and set them on a board by the side of the other hives. It was such a nice, sweet place, all amongst flowers, and the scent of the honey would come from the hives so strongly that very often the birds would come and think they would like a taste, while the wasps would even go so far as to creep in and steal some of the luscious food. As to flies, they would come without end, and if they had not been afraid of the bees they would soon have run off with all the sweet honey. But one day there was a very serious bluebottle who had sat upon the end of a sweet pea watching the bees so busy, while he had been doing nothing all day but make a noise, and he felt at last so ashamed of himself, that when he saw a bee come to the flower he was on, and put his long trunk into it to find whether there was any honey, he began to buzz very loudly; and the bee, looking up to know what he meant, heard him say—

“Little bee, buzzing about in the air,
For once be not busy, a moment pray spare,
And tell me, pray tell me, how honey you make
From the flowerets of garden, soft meadow, and bra-
ke.
You rise with the sun, and your gossamer wing
Bears you swiftly away where the heather-
bells spring;

Whence you come heavy laden with nectary spoil,
For the sweet winter stores of your summer of toil.

"Oh! I would be busy; and lay up in store
For the days of the winter when cold showers pour,
And the wild wintry breezes sweep flowers away,
While the sun sets in gloom o'er the dim-
shadowed day;
But I'm a poor bluebottle, spoken of ill;
Whilst you are protected, all bear me ill-will;
And if I escape from each murderous blow,
The first cutting frost lays the bluebottle low.

"So little bee buzzing, a lesson pray give;
Remember the motto to 'live
and let live;' For one moment teach me sweet hone-
y to make,
That again in the spring-time with you I may wake."

"Buzz," said the bee, "that's all very fine, but you were never meant to make honey. Go and do your duty, and lay eggs in the bad meat to make maggots to eat it up, so that we may not have the nasty stuff lying about. I daresay you think we have a very fine time of it amongst the honey; but, don't you know, sometimes somebody comes with the brimstone and smothers us all, and takes the honey away? How should you like that, old blue-boy?"

"Worse and worse—wuz-z-z-ooz-wooz," said the bluebottle, and off he flew, and never sang any more songs to the bees; while the old bee burst out laughing so heartily at the way in which the bluebottle was frightened, that he let all the bee-bread tumble out of his baskets, and before he could pick it up, a bee from another hive flew off with it.

"There," said the first bee, "that comes of laughing at other people, and now I've got all my work to do over again; but, oh dear! how he did bustle off when I told him about the brimstone."

Chapter Thirteen.

Cold Weather.

At last the merry summer-time was gone, and the flowers began to hang their heads in the gardens, looking wet and soiled; for every now and then the cold wind would come with a rush and a roar and knock the poor things about dreadfully; sometimes they would be struck right down on the ground, where they would lie, never to get up any more. Sometimes, however, the sun would come out to cheer them up again, but he was not at all warm; and then the nights began to grow so long and cold that the flowers had nearly made up their minds to go to sleep for the winter, when Jack Frost sent word one night that he was coming, and his messenger left such a cold chill everywhere that he had been, that the flowers all went to sleep at once, and the leaves on the trees, turning yellow with fright, began to shake and shiver, and tumble off as hard as ever they could tumble, till they lay in great rustling heaps all over the gravel walks, where they were swept up and carried off into the back-yard. And then all the birds were as busy as ever they could be: the young ones were now strong on the wing, and there were such meetings and congregations in wood and field—on lawn and in tree—in hedgerow and down even in the ditches. The martins and swallows all said "Good-bye," and were off in a hurry; and all the other summer visitors who were lagging behind, when they saw the swallows go, went off as hard as ever they could, not even stopping to take any cold flies with them, they were in such a hurry. Sparrows and finches, they all made excursion parties, and went feasting in the stubble-fields; starlings, jackdaws, and rooks, they went worm-picking in the wet marshlands; and all the thrush family went off to the fields and hedgerows, seeking berries and fruits that had now grown tender and sweet; and so at last Greenlawn began to look very deserted all day, but it was not so of a night, for there would be a fine noise in the ivy, where all the sparrows came home to roost, for they were in such high spirits that they could not keep quiet, but kept on chatter, chatter, till it grew so dark they could not see to open their beaks. As to the starlings, they came home by scores to the warm, thick cedar, and there they whistled and chattered until the moon began to shine, when they, too, went off to sleep; and so, wherever there was a snug, warm spot at Greenlawn, the birds came back in the cold wintry nights to sleep—flying far-off in the day-time, but always returning at night.

They were hard times for the poor birds when Jack Frost had it all his own way; for in his sharp, spiteful, nip-toes fashion he would freeze and freeze everything until it was all as hard as steel; and then, so as to make sure that by hard work and bill-chipping no worms were dug out, he would powder the ground

all over with white snow, so that all the footmarks were stamped upon it as the birds walked along. Shiver-shiver-shiver; ah! it was cold! and food was so scarce that no one could get anything to eat but the robin-redbreast; and he would go up to the house, and, sitting upon the snow-covered sills, peep in at the windows with his great round staring eyes, until the master's little girls would come and open the sash, and shake all the crumbs out of their pinafores; so that the poor cold bird would often get a good hearty meal.

Sometimes the sun would come out and shine upon the snow-wreaths, and they would glitter and sparkle, and turn of the most beautiful colours; while the trees were covered with frost-work that looked more brilliant than the finest silver that was ever worked.

But, ah! the poor birds! it was a sad time for them; and they would huddle up together in flocks; and very often got to be so cold and hungry that the country people picked them up half dead, with their feathers all ruffled up and their beautiful little bright, beady eyes half-shut. Ah! those were sad times at Greenlawn; and the master would gladly have helped the poor things if he could; but generally they used to fly right off, miles away, so that very often not a bird was to be seen but Bob Robin, who kept hopping about the doors and windows.

But Jack Frost did not care a bit, for he loved freezing; and when the winter nights were come, with the moon shining, and the stars twinkling and blinking ever so high up, Jack would put on his skates and go skimming over the country, breathing on people's window-panes, and making them all over ferny frost-work; hanging icicles round the eaves of the houses; making the roads so hard that they would sound hollow and rattle as the wheels passed over; and turning the ponds, lakes, and rivers into hard ringing ice. Then the frost would hang upon the labourers' hair, and little knobs of ice upon the bristles about the horses' muzzles; while some of the branches of the trees would become so loaded with the white clinging snow that they would snap off and fall to the ground. Away would troop the birds in the day-time then to feast upon the scarlet berries of the holly, the pearly dew-like drops of the mistletoe, or the black coaly berries that grew upon the ivy-tod; and away and away they would fly again with wild and plaintive cries as Jack Frost would send a cutting blast in amongst them to scare them away. How the poor birds would look at the man cutting logs of wood to take to the master's house; and how they would watch the blue smoke and sparks come curling out of the wide

chimneys. In the night the wild geese would fly over to the moor, crying "Clang-clang-clang," and frightening many a shivering sleeper with their wild shriek; and then the long-necked birds would dart down from their high swoop to some lonely lake in the wild moor, there to sit upon the cold ice, pluming themselves ere they started again for some spot where the frost king had not all his own way.

Old Ogrebones, the kingfisher, lay snug at the bottom of his hole in the bank; while all the tender birds were far-off in milder climes, where flies were to be caught, and where the sun shone bright and warm. As to the poor ducks, they could do nothing but paddle and straddle about over the surface of the glassy pond, for almost as soon as the hard ice was broken for them to get water, it all froze together again; and in spite of their thick coats of warm down and feathers, they said it was almost too cold to be borne. The rooks had gone down to the sea-side and the mouths of the rivers to pick up a living when the tide went down; while all the other birds that were not in the fields made friends with the sparrows, and went in flocks to the farmyards, where they could find stray grains of corn, and run off with them, chased by the old cocks and hens. And still Jack Frost had it all his own way, and stuck his cold, sharp teeth into everything and everybody—even into the foreign thrushes and grey crows that came over from Norway, Sweden, and Denmark, and nipped them so that they all said they had better have stayed at home.

Now, all this could not have been borne, only that Jack Frost would go to sleep sometimes, and then down would come a soft, warm rain that would wash away the snow and melt the ice, and soften the ground so that food became plentiful again; and the birds would set to and make up for lost time by having such a feast as would make them better able to bear Jack Frost's next fast, and strong enough to set his sharp teeth at defiance.

They were fine times for feasting when the thaw had set in, for then, as the earth grew soft, the worms would come crawling out to have a stretch, after being asleep beneath the iron-bound earth. As for the rooks, they ate until they could hardly move, and gormandised in a way that could only be excused in things that could not get their meals at regular times. "Snip-snap" went the bills all over the marshlands, and gobble-gobble went the poor worms; and so for about a week the birds had such a feast that their skins all got quite tight with the thick jacket of fat that was spread beneath them to keep the cold out, and all

their feathers began to stick up so that they had plenty of work to smooth them down. But such weather did not last long, for soon Jack Frost would wake up again, quite cross to think how long he had slept, and then on he would put his sharp steel skates again, and away over the country he would skim with all the land turning to iron wherever he went, and looking as if the keen old fellow had been sprinkling diamonds and emeralds and pearls all over the ground. As to the sheep, they would quite rattle with the knobs of ice upon their wool, while the turnips they were nibbling out in the fields were like snowballs. And away skimmed Jack Frost by the light of the bright moon, while all the stars kept laughing and winking at his freaks, and soon again all the country was powdered over with snow, and the water all turned to ice. Then at night, when the cold cutting wind would hum outside the doors and sing through all the chinks, trying to get in, people would draw the red curtains close, and heap up the dry logs of wood upon the fire till the bright blue flames would dance and flicker, and flicker and dance, and roar up the chimney; but all the time sending such warmth and comfort through the rooms that the wind would give up trying, and, knowing that it could not battle with such a warm fire, would rush off again over the bare woods and fields to help Jack Frost, and bear away the words of the song he was singing, so that everybody could hear it. For the icy fellow as he skimmed along would laugh and shout to see how everybody was afraid of him, and lighted fires to keep him away; and then he would sing,—

“I kiss cheeks and make them rosy;
I make people wrap up cosy;
I bring chilblains, chaps, and nipping;
I send people quickly tripping.
See my breath all silver lacing;
Feel my touch how cold and bracing;
Come and race o’er ground so snowy;
Come and trip ’mid breezes blowy.
I’ll make little eyes look brightly;
I’ll make little hearts beat lightly;
And when cheeks grow red as cherry,
Then will echo voices merry.
For I’m Jack Frost who makes cheeks rosy;
I make people wrap up cosy;
I bring chilblains, chaps, and nipping;
But send the little people tripping.”

But in spite of all Jack Frost could do, the birds at Greenlawn would manage to get through the harsh time of winter, looking out for the spring to come again; and happy and contented, though always very busy, and trying hard to do their duty as well when the cold wintry rains fell, or the biting sleet, or soft falling snow, or even when the ground was all hard and they were nearly starved, as when plenty reigned around; for still they hoped on, and waited for spring, that seemed so long in coming, but yet would surely come at last, however long it might appear, and tire their patience.

Chapter Fourteen.

False Alarm.

One morning, when a soft breeze from the south had melted away all the snow, and the bright sun had thawed all the ice in the ditches, brooks, and ponds, everything looked so bright and fine, that the snowdrops and crocuses popped their heads out of the ground, and kept calling to one another across the gravel walk, "All a-growin' and a-blowin'," as the men who bring round the flowers. Two or three violets opened their little blue eyes, too, and poking at the dead leaves that were lying on them, kept trying to get a peep at the bright sun; for he had had a bad cold all through the winter, and had kept his head wrapped up in thick mists and clouds, only showing himself now and then; and when he did, his face looked all red, swelled, and inflamed, as though he had got a dreadful fit of neuralgic-tic-doloreuginal-toothache. And now the blue-eyed violets wanted to have a peep at the sun, and to nod at their old friend; but the leaves lay so wet and heavy upon them that they could hardly get out, and when they did, poor things, their heads were all bent down, and they looked as drooping as though their necks were cricked with sleeping in a damp bed. And truly it was a very damp bed—the violets'—all moss and wet grass in a shady bank; but the cheerful little flowers did not mind it a bit, but sent forth such a sweet scent all through the hedgerows, that as soon as the birds smelt it they began to sing, and to think it was time to build nests again.

"Spring's come! spring's come!" shouted a little chiff-chaff, just come over from a foreign country all in a hurry; for while he was getting ready, and thinking it was time to pay a visit to England, there came a great storm of wind, and caught up the little, tiny greeny bird and blew him right over the seas; and

then, because it was a bright day when he got here, he began running up and down the country crying out "Spring's come! spring's come!" when spring was only just putting one or two of her toes in the shape of crocuses and snowdrops out of her wintry bed, to see how cold it was, and whether she might get up yet.

Spring had not come, for it was too soon, and the stupid little chiff-chaff thought himself such an important little body that because he had come spring must have come too. And no end of mischief he did, for as is always the case when one person does a foolish thing, plenty more begin to follow the bad example; and so one bird after another took up the cry, till it rang all over Greenlawn that spring had come; and the birds set to work in such a hurry to repair last year's damaged nests or to make new ones. As to the rooks, they came all in a bustle to the old limes and held a parliament, which every now and then turned into a squabble about some favourite spot, and there they all stopped talking, and flying round and round, but soon began again, to keep on till it grew quite dark, and then they were silent till some obstinate bird or another would say something crooked, and then out they all burst again—"Caw-caw-caw," till the awkward rook was talked down; then somebody else would have the last word, when they broke out again two or three times over, till at last it grew so dark that the rooks were afraid to speak any more, lest somebody should come and upset them upon their perches, and they not see the enemy coming.

The next morning everybody began to call the chiff-chaff names, and to say it was a little cheat; for a sharp sleety rain had been falling for hours and freezing as it fell, so that all the rooks' claws were stuck fast to the tall, top branches of the limes. As to the crocuses, they had squeezed themselves up as small as grass, and half crept back into the earth, while the snowdrops had shut up their houses and pulled down the green blinds to keep the cold out, and as to the violets, why, they crept under the dead leaves again to wait for the sun's next appearance.

No; it was not spring yet, and no one knew it better than the little chiff-chaff, who had crept into the ivy-tod, where the great dark leaves flopped down, and kept everything dry underneath; and there the poor little thing kept dancing the dicky-bird's dance, and going bibbity-bob, bibbity-bobberty, up and down, to keep himself warm, and wishing that the great, rough, rude wind had blown somebody else out of the warm country to cry

"Spring's come; spring's come," because it happened to be a fine bright sunshiny day.

But the little bird did not mean to do wrong, and so he stopped in the ivy-tod and lived upon cold spider for a whole week, drinking the melted sleet off the ivy leaves, and wishing all the time that spring had come, for he expected no end of friends and relations over as soon as the weather was fine enough; and, besides, he was anxious to feel the warm weather; for he was rather a delicate little fellow, who was obliged to go to a warm place in the winter time for the benefit of his health, and only came to spend the fine part of the year at Greenlawn.

Chapter Fifteen.

Spring at Last.

"Build away, birds; there's no chiff-chaff trickery this time. Spring is here," said the thrush, "and here's all the company coming. All the swallow family are over, and here's the wryneck been playing a tune upon its comb all the morning; as for those sit-up-o'-night birds, they've been sing-sing, till I'm almost tired of it, and wish they would set to work and find something better to do. But what's the matter down there?"

It was plain that something was the matter, for all the birds were leaving their work on purpose to go and see what was wrong; for there was the yard-dog, Boxer, loose in the garden again, barking, and snapping, and snarling at something rolled up amongst the dead leaves. The thrush flew up, and settling on a low branch, stopped to watch what was the matter; and he soon saw, for there, causing all the noise, was a tightly-rolled up hedgehog, with his sharp spines sticking up all over, and looking for all the world like a sharp round hair-brush. As for Boxer, he was sniffing and snuffing and pricking his nose in his efforts to get Blacknose open; but the little spikey thing would not open the least bit in the world, but kept himself rolled up snug and fast, with nothing but spines and thorns sticking out all over him. The more Boxer sniffed and poked at the round ball, the more he got pricked, and then he held up his head and whined in so comical a way, that all those who were looking on could not keep from laughing, which made the dog so cross that he barked at the birds, and made believe to bite; only they were all out of reach; and this made him all the more cross and snappish.

At last Boxer got the prickly thing close to the bank, and over it rolled right down into an old rabbit's hole, where the dog could not reach it; so then he turned round and ran at the first thing he saw, which happened to be the magpie, who stayed so long upon the ground before flying up, that the dog got hold of one of his tail-feathers.

"Pull, magpie!" shouted the birds. And magpie did pull, as hard as ever he could pull, and fluttered and flew, but he could not get his tail-feather away, so had to leave it behind with Boxer, who quietly sat down on the grass and began to gnaw and tear the beautiful glossy green plume, until he had completely spoiled it, when he threw it away, and began to look out for some more fun; whilst poor Mag's tail was so sore, that he went home grumbling and half-crying at his misfortune.

Busier and busier the birds grew every day; there was no one idle in Greenlawn in spring-time, but all hard at work, build-build-build from morning, when the first rosy peep of day appeared, and the blackbird cried out, "Wake-wake-wake," until the night closed in, and the pale new moon peeped down from amid the light clouds, watching over the nesting birds, with their beaks tucked snugly under their wings, and gently swaying about upon the light branch that rocked them to sleep with the easy motion of the soft spring breeze. Sweetly then used to sing the nightingales, perched on the low boughs of the fresh-leaved bushes, and whistling for their wives, not yet come over the sea; whistling and answering one another from wood to wood, and from grove to grove, until the night rang with the sweet sounds, and bird after bird would draw out its head to listen to the sweet, strong-voiced warblers. But generally the birds used to grumble at the nightingale, and say it was not fair of him to make such a noise of a night. They wanted peace and quietness; and one old greenfinch, who could not sing a bit, and had no ear for music, used to say that the nightingale was as great a nuisance as old Shoutnight, the owl, and that his noises ought to be stopped.

But one night there was such a shouting and hoo-hooing that all the birds woke up in a fright. One asked the other what it meant, but no one knew, and every now and then, ringing through the still night, came the wild strange cry. Even the master of Greenlawn opened his window and looked out and wondered, and at last crabby old Todkins, the gardener, opened *his* window, and even called the birch-broom boy up to listen; but they could not make out what the noise was. Nobody knew, and at last they began to be like the birds, rather frightened;

for it was such a wild, dreadful cry as they had never heard before.

"It's a wild goose," said Mrs Spottleover to her mate.

"You're a goose," said Spottleover, all of a shiver. "You never heard a goose cry out like that. It's like a peacock, only ten times more horrible; and—there it goes again; isn't it dreadful?"

The old owl said it was a rude boy trying to hoot; while the saucy jackdaw said it was nothing to be afraid of, for it was only old Shoutnight with a bad cold.

But, last of all, out came the old gardener with a lantern in one hand, a stick in the other, and his red nightcap on, to look round the garden and see what was the matter. No sooner was he out on the lawn than all the stupid birds began to look about his light to see what it was made of, and how it was that what they took for a glow-worm should be going about the lawn; and still all this while the dreadful cry kept coming, now higher, now lower, and the gardener could not find out what it was; but at last he stood stock-still and scratched his head, until the tassel of his red nightcap went jiffle-iffle, and danced up and down like a loose leaf on a twig.

"There, I don't care," said the gardener; "I'm going home to bed again; so ye may shout all night, whatever ye are, unless ye like to speak. But, hallo, Boxer, boy! what is it?" he said, as the dog laid hold of his leg and then ran on before him, turning round every now and then to see if his master would follow; and at last he did follow the dog till it stopped, barking and smelling, at the edge of the dip well, where the water-grotto was, and the cresses grew under the trickling spring—a little well-like place it was; and just as the old man came up the cry seemed to rise out of the water so wildly and shrilly, that he gave a jump and dropped his lantern.

Fortunately, however, the lantern did not go out, and so he quickly picked it up again and held it down, and there, swimming round and round, and unable to get out, was poor Blacknose, the hedgehog, getting fainter and fainter, and nearly drowned, and crying out for somebody to pull him out.

"Well, only to think of that little thornball making all that noise," said the gardener, helping the poor thing out and setting it on the grass; when it was so grateful that it would have thanked him if it could, but it could not, and so stopped there quite still while Boxer put his cold black nose up to it, and stood wagging

his thick stumpy tail; for he was too generous a dog to meddle with anyone in trouble, even a hedgehog; and piggy, feeling that he was in distress, and an object of sympathy, did not even attempt to curl up, but lay quite still, waiting for his visitors to go.

"Well," said the old man, "I suppose I am not going to hurt ye, for the master won't have anything hurt; so come along, Boxer; and dinna ye be fetchin' a chiel oot o' bed at sic a time o' nicht again, or ye may e'en stop i' the water." And then the old gardener went off to his cottage; and Boxer, after a run back and a scamper round the rescued hedgehog, went to his kennel.

And so things went on at Greenlawn, year after year, and season after season. It may perhaps seem a very wonderful place; but there are a great many little Greenlawns all over England, where little eyes may see the birds do many of the things that have been told in this little story—a story thought of to please two little girls who were very fond of leaning up against somebody's knee in the evenings before the candles were lighted, and asking somebody to tell them a story.

The End.
